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AFRICAN STATISTICAL SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

1. This paper is presented at the request of the ninth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers in April 1983, which, in adopting resolution 469 (XVIII) on African statistical services, felt that the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers should further examine the whole question of how to meet African statistical needs. The matter has become of increasing concern in the following way.

2. It has been apparent for some years that, although African statistical services are continuing to make progress and a few of them are doing very well, statistics in many countries are not performing the role that would be expected after a quarter of a century of independence. At the same time it has to be noted that African economic and social planning continues to be of a pragmatic rather than technical nature.

3. These two considerations are of course inter-dependent. Planning cannot make technical progress until adequate basic data are available, and pragmatic planning not based on extensive data analysis perpetuates a low demand for data. There is then stagnation unless some other factor intervenes to promote more effective activity.

4. It could have been expected that the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent economic difficulties would serve as such a factor by making developing countries aware of the need to compete more intensively in a changing global economic situation. There has certainly been plenty of international discussion on this topic through UNCTAD, the Group of 77, special meetings of the UN General Assembly to propose a new international economic order, etc. Surprisingly, none of this has led to any real change in national statistical and planning activities, which would have enabled individual countries and groups of countries to assess their own economic situations within the global context, thus providing a better basis for effective action. Perhaps it is reasonable to conclude that too much reliance has been placed on international negotiations, without realizing that the success of such efforts depends on supporting activity at national level.

5. It was, in fact, in the mid-1970s that deficiencies in planning and statistics became more apparent in many African countries. The impact of world economic problems, instead of serving as a challenge to evaluation and planning, seems to have impeded them and other more local problems have made the situation worse.

6. Technical assistance arrangements in statistics may also have contributed to the problem of countries. At the beginning of the 1970s, UNDP had a financial crisis at the same time as UNFPA was establishing its activities. In many countries, it resulted in a significant shift of work from economic to demographic statistics. Thus, when economic conditions deteriorated in 1973 and good economic data and analysis would have been useful, statistical services were being encouraged to concentrate on the mainly internal matter of population censuses through the largest international statistical operation ever mounted.

7. The deficiency in planning and statistics has been associated with and to some extent contributed to two kinds of problems. Firstly, there has been a serious deterioration in the economic and social conditions of some African countries, with very little progress in most of the remainder. The global economic situation, droughts, wars, etc. are usually given full

blame for the shortfall in progress, but the point being made here is that their effects could have been greatly reduced by better planning and data services.

8. Secondly, African and other developing countries have placed themselves at a disadvantage in north-south, south-south and any other kind of international negotiation, simply because they do not know enough about their own economic and social conditions and the related causes. No one can hope to win an argument if the other side has made better preparation.

9. The problem now is to improve the situation and the present paper is concerned specifically with action needed in respect of national statistical services, as a basis for more effective and technical national planning. It should be understood that, in the context of the paper, planning is not confined to the work of ministries responsible for drafting and monitoring development plans. In many countries, ministries of finance and central banks have a predominant position. It is also necessary to take into account the planning activities of ministries concerned with specific areas of economic and social development.

RECENT ACTION

First session of the Joint Conference

10. Action has been going ahead for some time to ameliorate the situation outlined above. At its first session in 1980, the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers had the task of preparing recommendations for submission to the first African economic summit through the ECA Conference of Ministers. The joint conference made the following recommendations of direct concern to national statistical services.

(a) As a matter of urgency, African countries must strengthen their statistical infrastructures as a basis for effective policy-making and planning. In this connection they are urged to formulate statistical development programmes and these should be included in national development plans. These programmes should incorporate a list of data requirements in line with needs and priorities;

(b) In order to mobilize external resources for the implementation of the African Household Survey Capability Programme, the 1980 round of Population and Housing Censuses and the System of National Accounts, African Governments should reaffirm their priorities in these programmes and provide the necessary counterpart financial support;

(c) Each Government should institute appropriate mechanisms for the evaluation and analysis of data. These mechanisms should ensure proper linkages between data collectors, analysts and users;

(d) It is desirable that a statistical data base for the storage and retrieval of information be established in individual countries.

11. The preparatory committee which met immediately after the joint conference deleted the last recommendation on the grounds that it was a general problem affecting all disciplines and not particularly confined to the field of statistics. The ECA Conference of Ministers endorsed the recommendations in their amended form. The OAU Economic Summit approved the recommendations on statistics without further amendment.

Working group on statistical organization and manpower

12. The first session of the joint conference also requested a working group on statistical organization and manpower, which met in 1981 under the sponsorship of the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA). It thoroughly examined all aspects of statistical development and its report is available in document ST/ECA/PSD.2/18. Some of its main conclusions on the organization and development of statistical services are summarised in the following paragraphs.

13. Although theworking group agreed that progress achieved by national statistical services has been less than desirable, it observed that their state of development must to a large extent reflect the development of civil services and countries as a whole. It should not be assumed that statistics are lagging far behind other activities, althouth in some countries this is certainly the case.

14. The group said that co-ordination is a primary factor in accelerating statistical development, particularly when the work is dispersed on a geographical basis or between subject ministries. It strongly urged that more countries should make use of national statistics committees and pointed out that these committees must have sufficient authority to ensure satisfactory impact. In addition to continuing co-ordination and monitoring, one of the main functions of such a committee would be the preparation of a statistical development programme for incorporation in the national development plan. Nevertheless, the statistics committees should not be seen as a panacea to all problems. National statistical services must themselves create confidence through the timely production of results. They must also take all possible steps to promote awareness of the need for statistics.

15. It was recommended that the work programmes of statistical services should not be confined to the routine collection and dissemination of data, but should be extended to the more imaginative use of data for evaluation and monitoring and a close involvement in data analysis, including the preparation of annual economic surveys, etc. The group also believed that continuity is essential to the success of a work programme and that it has to be achieved through the efforts of local staff rather than foreign experts.

16. Particular stress was placed on the need for a satisfactory balance between subjects in statistical programme, which might be considered in the context of a national policy for information and analysis. However the structure of a statistical service should be as simple and flexible as possible and the group was somewhat against the creation of special technical units, e.g. in designing surveys.

17. The close links between statistical and planning agencies, which exist in most countries, were generally considered to be an advantage. If a statistical service can become involved in the planning process, through the provision of appropriate data and active participation in its analysis, it is likely to develop more quickly.

18. There were somewhat mixed feelings among the group about the usual claim that statisticians have a status inferior to that of many other government officials. Salary considerations may in fact be less important than the provision of appropriate training and interesting work.

19. The group was not opposed to the decentralised statistical arrangements in many African countries, but it did believe that some form of control is necessary, e.g. through the outposting of statisticians from the central statistical service. The location of the central service itself normally in the planning ministry, was not considered specially important. The primary requirement is that it should handle its own budget and accounts and have reasonable freedom of action. The group pointed out that the extent to which this freedom is achieved depends more on the quality of leadership in the statistical service than on any formal arrangement.

20. The group felt that the question of statistical legislation was more complex than envisaged in the working paper provided by the secretariat. It did agree that statistical laws should be kept as simple as possible, but their content would necessarily vary with the size of countries and their administrative structures.

21. Data processing and dissemination was agreed to be one of the most serious constraints in African statistical development and it is now a complex problem. The group examined the details at some length and its main conclusions were that statistical services must be responsible for their own data processing arrangements, and that there must be a satisfactory balance in their work between the collection of data and its processing. The latter may often require the decentralization of some editing and coding activity, particularly in the case of field surveys.

22. The group concluded its discussion on statistical organization by requesting the ECA secretariat to take necessary follow-up action and provide illustrative material which could be adapted for application in particular countries. Other topics considered were the means of deciding priorities within a statistical programme, staff development, research and analysis, and technical assistance, which are not of direct concern in the present paper.

Second session of the Joint Conference

23. The report of the working group was duly presented to the joint conference in 1982, but in the context of STPA rather than as a separate agenda item. This was unfortunate because the working group had performed well, but necessary because the agenda was overloaded. Nevertheless the joint conference approved the report and requested follow-up action.

Ninth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers

24. The full report of the working group was not suitable for presentation in the heavy agenda of the ninth meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers, which was also the eighteenth session of the Economic Commission for Africa and its silver jubilee anniversary. There were also developments after the meeting of the working group to be taken into account.

25. All recent conclusions were therefore summarised and presented in a short working document. The preparatory committee of the Conference of Ministers complained that it was too short, but it nevertheless led to the adoption of ECA resolution 469 (XVIII) which will hopefully be of some help in drawing attention to the need for statistics at national level and in showing how national efforts to improve statistics can best be supported by international and bilateral agencies.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

26. After the 1981 working group on statistical organization and manpower, two considerations emerged more clearly. The first was that it is really not sufficient to regard data analysis as the essential link between data producers and users. It is necessary to go one step further and look at data applications. If a fairly clear and detailed idea can be formed of how data will be used, it becomes much easier to decide what kinds of analytical work are necessary and also what data should be collected. Initially this may require a special effort to identify applications, but in the longer term there should be feedback from actual data uses to facilitate the planning of statistical operations.

27. Secondly, it appeared from a number of country missions that available statistical resources are not always fully utilized. In a few countries there is a distinct management problem which needs to be rectified.

28. These two considerations and all earlier conclusions were taken into account when describing the position to the Conference of Ministers in document E/ECA/CM.9/11. However, for simplicity, the more detailed organizational matters considered earlier by the working group were not included.

Constraints on statistical development

29. African Governments have invariably affirmed the importance of statistical information but the priority given to collection, processing, analysis and use of data remains low. There is still a preference for more visible projects in both government budgets and external aid programmes.

30. In the absence of a consistent effort to improve the supply of data, Governments have adopted a pragmatic and non-technical approach to planning, which itself perpetuates a low demand for data.

Unfortunately this approach has not proved satisfactory and developing countries have found it difficult to compete in the adverse trading conditions of the present global recession and to achieve effective internal economic and social structures. In addition it has to be noted that some people still genuinely believe that quantitative data are not necessary for planning purposes.

31. No one would claim that better statistics can supply a complete answer to current problems but at least they can put the problems in their proper perspective and help in examining their causes.

32. The low priority attached to quantitative information has had a notably adverse effect on many national statistical services. One problem is a continuing brain drain at the professional level which has not been offset by the training of new staff. Staff losses at the senior level have led to management weaknesses which have resulted in underutilization of available statistical resources. This is the main cause of late data delivery, particularly from surveys, and has itself discouraged governments from taking greater interest in statistical development.

33. In a situation where they are not receiving active encouragement, many heads of statistical services have tended to concentrate on day-to-day work, neglecting the establishment of contacts with other government organizations and with the local representatives of international and bilateral agencies. This has placed many statistical services in a relatively poor position to claim priority in the allocation of government budget resources and in external assistance programmes. To have any influence on these arrangements requires a continuing effort through regular contact with the appropriat people.

34. Two other problems should also be noted. An additional factor leading to the slow production of statistics is a bottleneck at the data processing stage which arises largely because statisticians have not kept themselves adequately informed of rapidly developing computer technology. The result is a separation of the data collection and processing functions, with additional organizational problems and an uneven flow of work.

35. There is also a problem of separation at the international level. Various different agencies are responsible for providing technical assistance in their own fields of activity and, in spite of efforts by the United Nations Statistical Commission, the work is not always co-ordinated as well as it should be. In addition, international statistical recommendations tend to stop short at the data processing and tabulation stage and do not give enough guidance on data analysis and applications which have to be regarded as a separate issue.

36. The over-all position in the light of the foregoing comments is that there is certainly an awareness of the need for quantitative information but its production and use is by no means satisfactory. The faults lie with both the producer and the users of data and a special initiative is needed to accelerate the process of statistical development. This need not be very expensive and the main lines of action are outlined in the next secton.

Improvement of African Statistics

37. The action needed to ensure faster development of national statistical services can be classified fairly easily into three groups which indicate the responsibility for such action: the government, the national statistical service itself and international agencies. However it must again be emphasized that conditions differ widely between countries and the steps to be taken in each country have to be worked out on an individual basis.

A. The Government

38. Much greater emphasis should be placed on the end-product of statistical operations, which is data applications. If the ways in which statistics will be used for specific purposes can be properly identified, it becomes much easier to determine the kinds of analysis to be carried out and, in turn, the processing and data collection requirements. It is appreciated that there is an interaction between the supply and use of data because additional applications emerge when new data become available; but a conscious effort to identify the applications can do much to accelerate the production of data.

39. In order to do their work satisfactorily, statistical services must have an adequate supply of trained personnel. Progress is already being made in this connection through the Statistical Training Programme for Africa (STPA) and a detailed study of statistical organization and training needs is being undertaken in collaboration with the European Economic Community (EEC). However training alone is not sufficient and Governments must have a good working environment, which means that their assignments have to be challenging and interesting.

40. Data processing facilities and other supporting resources (paper, printing, transport, etc.) must be assured to avoid operational delays in data production. In one African country recently, work on foreign trade statistics was halted for lack of paper for computer printouts. Such problems derive not so much from budgetary constraints as from inefficient procurement.

41. In order to view statistical activities in their proper perspective and assign a clearly understood priority to the work, countries should prepare statistical development programme and incorporate them in their national development plans. This is an important recommendation of the Lagos Plan of Action and has implications for the local financing of national statistical activities. It should be borne in mind that the cost of statistical services in Africa, when developed effectively and including f field survey organizations, is not likely to exceed 0.5 per cent of the central government budget.

42. The statistical development programme should specify the objectives to be achieved during the period of the national plan and the means by which this will be done. In addition the programme should provide a basis for monitoring the performance of the statistical service. It is necessary to check continuously on the implementation of new developments and on whether outputs are delivered in good time.

43. To ensure that the most effective use is made of data, government planning agencies, both centralized and in specific ministries, should be encouraged to adopt a more systematic and technical approach to their work, which would also overcome the disadvantages of the present ad hoc pragmatic planning arrangements. It follows that better training of planners has to be considered along with the training of statisticians.

B. National statistical service

44. More use should be made of national statistics committees for the planning and co-ordination of activities and for the preparation of realistic and integrated statistical development programmes. One of the aims of these committees should be to improve day-to-day contact between statistical services, their user clients and the suppliers of data.

45. Statistical services must demonstrate the ability to issue regular statistical publications and reports on surveys, etc., in a timely manner. In many countries this requires an improvement in managerial performance rather than additional resources and is essential for gaining government confidence in statistics. It can moreover be achieved through the preparation of annual work programmes within the context of the statistical development programme.

46. To help in overcoming existing serious delays in the production of data there should be increasingly close involvement of statisticians in computerized data processing. This has to be dealt with in both basic training and subsequent courses, as well as generally in working arrangements.

C. International agencies

47 In organizing external assistance, a more integrated approach is required in examining the statistical needs of individual countries comprehensively instead of treating the various subject fields as separate entities, e.g. the existing special interests in price, national accounts and environment data. There is thus need for further improvement in interagency co-ordination, but it should be noted that multi-subject programmes such as the National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP) and data needed for rural development are an additional strong integrating factor. More use could be made of the United Nations regional commisions in achieving a properly consolidated account of the situation and requirements in individual countries.

48. International statistical recommendations should be extended beyond data collection, processing and tabulation to encompass data analysis and applications. Again this implies a co-ordinated inter-agency effort and would greatly assist Governments in achieving a clearer understanding of data uses and the need for statistics.

49. The resolution adopted by the Conference of Ministers is reproduced below.

Resolution 4c9 (XVIII). African statistical services[24/]

The Conference of Ministers

Aware of the urgent need to improve economic and social policy formulation planning, administration and analysis in the context of the Lagos Plan of Action 25/ which aims to promote African development through collective self-reliance,

Recognizing that the effective organization of these activities requires adequate quantitative information at the national, subregional and regional levels,

Noting that many African statistical services are not yet able to supply this information in a satisfactory and timely manner because of significant interrelated constraints which include low data demand for non-technical planning, statistical brain drain, management weaknesses, data processing difficulties and failure to regard data applications as a principal guide in organizing data collection, processing and analysis,

Further noting that there is still a lack of co-ordination in external assistance to statistics and international recommendations in this field do not adequately cover data analysis and applications,

1. Urges Governments of the region to:

(a) Accord higher priority generally to the improvement and strengthening of their statistical services so as to provide data which will assist in assessing current economic and social problems and in accelerating development;

(b) Identify data applications as a basis for determining priorities for data collection and analysis in each subject field;

(c) Utilize fully available training facilities to provide staff for statistical services and ensure that these services are efficiently managed;

(d) Take steps to overcome existing data processing difficulties through the provision of adequate equipment and by ensuring that statistical personnel play a more direct and active role in computerized data processing;

(e) Make increasing use of national statistics co-ordinating organs for the planning and co-ordination of activities and for the preparation of realistic and integrated statistical development programmes, which should be incorporated in national development plans as recommended by the Lagos Plan of Action;

24/ See chapter III, section C, paragraphs 289 to 295.
25/ A/S-11/14, annex I.

(f) Within the context of their development programmes, ensure that statistical services prepare annual work programmes for issuing regular publications and reports on surveys, etc. and for conducting other activities in a timely manner;

(g) Encourage both central planning agencies and those dealing with particular subject fields to adopt a more technical and analytical approach to plan preparation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review;

2. Recommends that the United Nations and its specialized agencies should:

(a) Continue existing efforts to co-ordinate technical co-operation in all aspects of quantitative information;

(b) Extend international statistical recommendations to include guidelines on data analysis and applications;

3. Appeals to inter-governmental agencies, multilateral and bilateral organizations to:

(a) Continue to assist in strengthening the operation of statistical infrastructure in the region;

(b) Support activities designed to improve the utilization of statistical data for development;

4. Requests the Executive Secretary of the Commission to take all necessary steps to assist the improvement of African statistics along the lines indicated above.

FOLLOW-UP ACTION

50. Follow-up action on the resolution has already been initiated with international agencies by the secretariat in respect of some specific projects. A full report on developments will be given when the joint conference meets.

51. A more formal presentation of the resolution was made at the seventeenth session of the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities in June 1983. As the sub-committee is an inter-agency body, the points of concern were the requests for improved co-ordination of technical co-operation and the extension of international statistical recommendations to include guidance on data analysis and applications. The requests were reasonably well received in spite of the additional work they entail. The sub-committee also stressed that the improvement of statistics is very much dependent on the commitment of individual countries. Further action over quite a long period of time will be needed to ensure satisfactory implementation of the requests.

52. The resolution was also presented in June 1983 at a meeting of the steering committee which considered the draft report on the EEC/ACP/ECA study on statistical training needs in Africa. It can serve as a useful basis for a further joint effort to develop training in the region and to overcome some of the statistical manpower problems.

53. Action to be taken at national level is essentially a matter for consideration by the joint conference. The necessary steps are outlined in paragraphs 38 - 46 above and it is clear that they are mainly of an internal nature to be implemented, where necessary, by individual Governments on a self-reliant basis. However it should be noted that the ECA statistical programme is geared to supporting the kind of action envisaged and assistance will be given within the limits of available resources.

54. Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that, although very careful thought has been given to the identification of constraints on African statistical development and the related remedies, the conclusions are still of a tentative nature. A continuing dialogue is needed within the region if all problems are to be solved satisfactorily. At its third session, the joint conference may wish to contribute new or revised ideas in respect of the substantive and practical issues.